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E-Tourism Research, Cultural Understanding, and Netnography

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Abstract

For well over a decade, e-tourism researchers have been using netnography. Yet despite this use, netnography has thus far been under-utilized. Big data methods still predominate as a way to understand social media content, obscuring the potential for a more humanistic and meaning-rich understanding. This chapter is about netnography, a way to research social media that is flexible, contextualized, and enthusiastically agnostic about the type of data. Netnography has been developed as a way to study social media that maintains the cultural complexities of people's experiences. This chapter introduces the reader to the rigorous practice of netnography as it exists today. Then, it contrasts netnographic methods and insights with those provided by big data analysis approaches. Finally, it uses examples and illustration to explore key territories and implications of netnographic research to the understanding sought by e-tourism researchers, including electronic word of mouth, online reviews, online communities, selfies, and other travel and tourism-related phenomena.

Keywords Ethnography - E-tourism - Netnography - Online community - Online reviews - Qualitative research - Social media - Smart tourism - Word of mouth

Introduction

The fields of e-tourism and smart tourism collect, aggregate, analyze, and harness data that derives from sources such as the social connections of social media, as well as various other sources (Gretzel et al. [2015](#), 181). As you examine the contents of this book about e-tourism, you will find that, similar to business practice in tourism and other fields today, quantitative methods for understanding social media appear to predominate. These e-tourism quantitative methods include a range of big data analytics approaches such as using automated data scraping, data mining, predictive analytics, natural language processing, tourist tracking, and sentiment analysis to study social media phenomena. These types of analysis can be very valuable tools for revealing patterns in the large quantities of information that social media data collection methods typically generate.

However, there is a rich cultural and contextual aspect to e-tourism phenomena such as online travel reviews and electronic word of mouth, online communities, online influencers and audiences, travel food porn, and selfies. For almost 50 years now, qualitative researchers across the social sciences have been using and combining techniques such as focus groups, interviews, observation, participation, reflection, and interpretation to understand various aspects of online experiences and social interactions. Various types of qualitative research on social media data, using varieties of narrative, thematic, discursive, semiotic, and content analysis and interpretation techniques, have produced a rich body of theory as well as a curatorial type of chronicling of various aspects of life online. Cultural studies and technology studies researchers have been adapting qualitative research methods to the understanding of this deep, rich, multimedia, linguistically, symbolically, and visually complex mass of social media data. Across the social sciences, the application of a rigorous set of standards for qualitative social media research called netnography has been growing steadily.

For well over a decade, e-tourism researchers have been using these techniques. They have been using netnography, for example, to study how people talk online about the brands of destinations such as Bologna and Florence (Woodside et al. [2007](#)); Mumbai, Seoul, Singapore, and Tokyo (Martin et al. [2007](#)); Beijing, Lijiang, Shanghai, and Xi'an (Hsu et al. [2009](#)); and Tokyo (Martin et al. [2007](#)). Woodside et al. ([2007](#)) studied social media accounts of overseas visitors writing about their first visits to two Italian cities and found that these reports followed a narrative storytelling structure. The authors found that this rich data also offered “creative clues for positioning a destination uniquely and meaningfully in the minds of potential future visitors” such as “explanations of their own photographs that capture what these informants find especially worthwhile to report to others” which can offer both “an early warning system for learning [about] problems with a destination’s image as well as an early opportunity system for learning the images that excite visitors to advocate visiting the destination to friends, family members” and social media audiences (173).

Yet, despite increases in the use of netnography in tourism and e-tourism research, netnography still has a lot of unrealized potential (Tavakoli and Mura [2018](#); Whalen [2018](#)). Big data methods still predominate in e-tourism and smart tourism (Gretzel et al. [2015](#); Lu and Stepchenkova [2015](#)), obscuring the potential for a more humanistic and meaning rich understanding – and also limiting dataset pattern recognition to relatively large and mundane patterns – the inhalations and exhalations of the mainstream. This chapter is about netnography, a way to research social media that is flexible, contextualized, and enthusiastically agnostic about the type of data, device formats, sources of information, and other aspects of its inputs. Netnography has been developed as a way to study social media that maintains the cultural complexities of its interactants’ itinerant experiences. In Kozinets ([1997](#)), I introduced netnography as a way to study online media fan cultures and have been developing and adapting it, along with many others, ever since. In this chapter, I will introduce the reader to the rigorous and interdisciplinary world of netnography today,

contrast netnographic methods and insights with those provided by big data analysis approaches, and then explore some of the key territories and implications of netnographic research for the types of understanding sought by e-tourism researchers.

A brief history: evolving definitions of netnography for evolving social technologies

Before we can understand the application of netnography to e-tourism research, it is vital that we understand what netnography is, and to do that, I'd like to first provide some history. Working at the dawn of the contemporary age of social media, I developed netnography as a tool to study emerging online phenomena in a way that remained sensitive to their experiential, social, contextual, and cultural qualities. I began by honing the online ethnographic approach used by Baym ([1993](#)), Correll ([1995](#)), and Jenkins ([1995](#)) in my cultural study of fan groups online (Kozinets [1997](#)). But unlike these other scholars, my investigations of fandoms in the mid-to-late 1990s broadened very naturally to a range of other topics including wine, food, technology, beauty and fashion bloggers, videogames, and all sorts of review writing – usually finding ways in which these topics and phenomena interrelated with brands.

Using netnography to investigate early developments which indicated a rise in commercialism on social networks, I published some of the first articles discussing the rise of virtual communities (the social media platforms of their day), online influencers, their storytelling and brand-building functions, and the power they would eventually wield over marketers (Kozinets [1999a, b](#)). A few years later, I joined a team of skilled qualitative consumer researchers to use netnography to reveal the wider use of storytelling narratives, which were present both in market communications and in the public social media brand discussions of popular retro brands like the Volkswagen Beetle and Star Wars (Brown et al. [2003](#)). Later, I secured an industry partnership to conduct a netnographic field study. That project studied a social influencer campaign conducted in Canada by Nokia. It conceptualized electronic WOM as a series of “networked narratives” where influencers evaluate, explain, embrace, and endorse brands, services, and products in various discursive ways adapted to their unique social media ecosystems and narrative storytelling arcs (Kozinets et al. [2010](#)). Netnography’s substantive and theoretical developments include making the realization that social media is a contested, divisive, activist gathering place for online electronic tribes and a generator of e-tribalized markets (Kozinets [1999a, b](#)). They chart social media developments into an online community and influencer-based ecosystem (Kozinets et al. [2017](#); Kozinets et al. [2010](#)). More recently, they elaborate social media’s role in the evolution of vast, decentralized, and often passionate human-object-energy assemblages called “networks of desire ” (Kozinets et al. [2017](#)). These developments and findings were only possible because of the additional capacities provided by the netnography.

As they have with any method, good researchers have adapted netnography to meet a changing range of challenges and opportunities. When I began developing the method in

1995, there were about 23,500 websites online and less than 40 million internet users concentrated mainly in the United States. I developed the method mainly from my fieldwork on fan newsgroups that were posting on the Usenet service and accessed through early versions of the Netscape browser. A few years later, the dot com boom turned to bust and it looked, for a while, like the Internet's potential had been over-hyped. But then, blogs started to expand and gain popular attention, and so did social networking sites like Friendster, changing the social media game forever. From there, a range of different social media platforms including YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter came on the scene. Today, social media is a rapidly changing, complex, industrially and geopolitically critical, multi-billion-dollar industry with over 3.8 billion participants worldwide. Positioned as a way to gather data in order to understand social media phenomena, netnography is a dynamic set of techniques for the study of this constantly evolving ecosystem.

As social media platforms emerged and transformed, netnographic research followed and adapted existing methods to hunt for data. This means that netnography evolved and continues to evolve in relation to the larger field of social media and social media research and science (Kozinets [2020](#)). Originally, in the world of newsgroups and forums, netnographic research tended to be located much more in single online sites, which were held to resemble traditional ethnographic field sites (Kozinets [1998](#), [2002](#)). At that point, it seemed to many researchers that the deep hanging out of traditional netnographers in particular physical and cultural places could be transplanted to an online hanging out in particular online venues. Thus, early netnography was rather closely aligned with traditional ethnography, positioned as a written account of online fieldwork. In fact, through about the first decade of its use, netnography was still mainly used to study particular online sites and thus was methodologically linked to cultural anthropology's notions of field sites and ideas of participant-observation (Kozinets [2010](#)).

However, in more recent years, little of this original orientation remains. As it became evident that social media was becoming something very different and far more complex than newsgroups and chat rooms, netnographic researchers began exploring adaptations of netnography. Singular sites became much more complex, spreading across multiple platforms. Different platforms had different types of communication modalities and offered consumers different affordances. Even single platforms like Facebook contained complex online worlds within worlds. Anthropological notions of field sites were increasingly problematic and their principles increasingly difficult to maintain and adapt. Ethnographic notions of participation confused readers and researchers, who often simply substituted their own "observational" and "non-interactive" approaches. Sometimes, authors and editors confused netnography with content analysis, even claiming that covert techniques could be ethically used (they cannot). Eventually, I redefined and reconfigured the method away from field sites and participation (in Kozinets [2015](#)) and toward an emphasis on data operations and researcher engagement (in Kozinets [2020](#)). Contemporary netnography is built on the experimentation and publication of hundreds of researchers across the social sciences. Netnography combines scientific curiosity with a type of investigative journalistic

predilection, casting the ethnographer in the role of a sort of social media detective who must follow the cultural trail in order to reveal embedded truths.

The emphasis in netnography today is on providing a number of well-defined sub-procedures that guide the collection and analysis of social media data in order to provide quality qualitative research. However, there is wide latitude and an encouragement of innovation in representation and data usage in judging the quality of the work. Because social media ecosystems are dynamic, contextualized, and complex, contemporary netnographic research is designed to offer a wide range of different research techniques that can be adapted for a variety of different platforms, phenomena, and research foci.

Understanding Netnography Today

Netnography has developed into a synthesis of different procedures, operations, and academic fields. It is an amalgam of research perspectives that draw from its application to tourism studies, computer science, cultural studies, media anthropology, education, sociology, addiction studies, game studies, medicine and health, nursing, and many other fields – as well as from my own native fields of marketing and consumer culture research. Netnography's procedures and practices offer a new conceptual vocabulary to the social scientist who is interested in using social media and its multifaceted forms of communication as sources of qualitative data.

Netnography today is a sophisticated and explicit set of operational procedures for conducting qualitative social media research. It is founded in four basic steps of (1) research inquiry, (2) data collection, (3) data analysis and interpretation, and (4) research communication. These four steps are further developed into six movements of initiation, investigation, interaction, immersion, integration, and instantiation. Living within those movements are a number of different, detailed, research operations. These operations are sets of procedures that are adaptable to particular research contexts. They are there to guide netnographic researchers through the entire research process, from finding a research question to presenting and submitting the final manuscript. For example, the operation of turning a research question into queries and keyword searches that can be used in conventional search engines is called “simplification” in netnography. It contains specific rules. Another operation, called “selecting,” provides researchers with five standard criteria – relevance, activity, interactivity, diversity, and richness – that researchers can use to evaluate potential sites of social media data in order to ensure that they meet the needs of particular research projects. Other operations cover research procedures such as cleaning and coding data and finding good sources of online traces, interviewing people, creating research web-pages, conducting mobile ethnography, and interpreting cultural themes.

Despite the surface similarities, such as their focus on language and meaning, almost everything else about netnography is different from the workings of traditional anthropology. Unlike traditional anthropological fieldwork, netnography leaves behind core

notions that no longer fit in the world of social media: ethnographic field sites, field notes, and research participation. Yet, netnography's ethnographic sensibility still includes a detailed focus on cultural understanding. The netnographic researcher is encouraged to pay close attention to the use of language, imagery, symbolism, hierarchy, ritual, and other nuances of human experience as they present themselves within the vast range of social media behaviors. Through the operations of the method, the netnography of today is partly grounded in the ethnographic sensibility of past qualitative research inquiries, but also extends into the computer science reality of conducting research on social media. In netnography, the ethnographic field site has become a multi-sited online and offline site of potential data, a place to collect and then to curate consumer traces that relate to social media use. In e-tourism, for example, these cultural elements could be located in data such sites as YouTube travel videos and Pinterest fantasy travel board collections, in public comments to online news stories reported in the New York Times or The Guardian, or, of course, public reviews of hotels and tour operators on the TripAdvisor platform.

Netnography includes historical and other probing forms of secondary research as well. It is a source of deep consumer insight that uses interviews of various kinds, from short online interviews to long in-person conversations. There is no prescribed mode of researcher participation, which is similar to the diversity of practices in traditional participant-observational techniques. However, there is a range of positions from which the researcher can choose to engage with the data site in a variety of different ways. Because social media is diverse, varying by nation, platform, and type of media, researchers are constantly making adaptations to netnography's basic techniques in order to get better results. The resulting operations in netnography are dynamic. Netnographers are also expected to read and synthesize the published work of a small and growing community of active netnographic researchers that are easily accessible through academic search engines such as Google Scholar and those present on ResearchGate and Academia.edu. Included in this now fairly substantial body of work are the works of groups of scholars working in the field of tourism and e-tourism. Netnographers scan for, study, and then adapt relevant prior work of other qualitative social media scholars, their theories, and research operations, to the needs of the particular research project at hand. They are empowered by clear rules of ethical research in social media. These guidelines are different from those of in-person and emplaced ethnographers, and other online researchers, and they are also internationally diverse and continually changing. Netnography's ethical guidelines are in place to handle all the ethical questions and required institutional requirements that this research necessitates. These are some key differences to keep in mind. Netnography deals in data sites rather than field sites. It is focused on researcher engagement rather than participation. It presents an evolving and flexible methodology. And it offers clear and reputable research ethics guidelines. No other method for qualitative social media research can legitimately make these claims.

The transition from traditional qualitative techniques to a set of rigorous qualitative social media research standards and procedures (i.e., netnography) has not been a simple one. In fact, the transition from traditional qualitative research to research on social media is still developing. This development is accompanied by significant amounts of confusion. In this

chapter and in my recent works, I try to explain netnography as a way to help researchers address and ameliorate that confusion about how to rigorously apply and communicate about qualitative research that is conducted with social media data. With netnography, researchers can set forth confidently to research intriguing and complex topics using data drawn from social media sources using a set of more or less standardized, but still adaptable and always in flux, procedures for data collection, interviewing, journal keeping, data analysis, data interpretation, and communicating research results to various audiences. To understand why these are important to e-tourism, it may be useful to understand what netnography offers in comparison to the undisputed heavyweight champion of both social media data science and e-tourism-based studies: big data analytics.

Comparing Big Data and Netnography Approaches

Big data analysis is defined in relation to the size of the dataset. It is an analysis of datasets so large that they require unconventional means to handle them. Successful big data methods can provide broad overviews of massive amounts of data. Methods like automated data analysis, for instance, can allow e-tourism researchers to quickly classify millions upon millions of online reviews into various categories based upon keywords found in their subject lines or text. However, these methods currently have some important limitations. First, the view that they provide of e-tourism behavior tends to be very broad and decontextualized. Second, the types of data they can use are still somewhat limited (e.g., travel photos on Instagram or travel videos on YouTube might be difficult). Third, the reliability of the massive hardware and software machinery required for true big data analysis can be challenging (Jacobs [2009](#)). Fourth, a lot of data tends to be included, so it can be difficult to filter or sort for the types of data needed for a particular study or research question. Fifth, the results of these complex and difficult analyses might not yield theoretically interesting or actionable information. Where there is a lot of data being examined, it can often be difficult to differentiate meaningful signals from background noise (Few [2015](#)). Finally, the ethical standing of big data analysis in business research is unclear – and some scholars link the use of these methods to the manipulation and behavioral modification techniques that (Zuboff [2019](#)) dubs “surveillance capitalism.” Lu and Stepchenkova ([2015](#)) identify some of the other problems with big data approaches that they considered in their examination of user-generated content-based research in tourism: sample representativeness, completeness of the data, reliability, validity, and the fact that discussions of the generalizability of research results are often left out of the published articles’ discussion sections.

Unlike big data approaches, netnography is not defined in relation to the size of a dataset, but to its depth. Netnographic analysis and interpretation of social media data requires no major innovations in hardware construction, no advanced new software applications, and in fact no mathematical or other calculative skills. However, some netnographies might quantify or use social network analysis or use other techniques perhaps as data visualizations and reports to reveal cultural tendencies. Netnography is designed to do

something that big data analysis cannot do well: hear and understand the voice of individual digital informants and their groups and various collectives and socialities. We can see this in the work of Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen ([2012](#), 70), whose netnography revealed not only that the language of risk assessment in social media revolves around perceptions of “safety, threat, and danger” but also found that “risk perception was destination specific.” Relatedly, in Sthapit and Björk’s ([2019](#)) study of AirBnB and distrust, the research finds that the language of “‘stress’, ‘totally unacceptable’, ‘inconvenience’, ‘headache’, ‘deceived’, ‘screwed’, ‘worst service experience’, and ‘unsafe’ suggests that the guests experienced psychological discomfort alongside losses in self-esteem and self-efficacy” in ways that contrast both with “guests’ expectations” and “AirBnB’s marketing pitches” (p. 250).

Netnography’s strengths, then, are big data’s weaknesses. First, netnography offers a local and contextualized view of phenomena. Second, it is enthusiastically promiscuous about using all types of data, from Pinterest visual boards to travel photos on Instagram or YouTube travel vlogs. Third, it doesn’t require any sort of supercomputer, or anything more complex than a tablet or smartphone. Fourth, it is selective about which data it collects, minimizing the need to deal with a lot of unhelpful background noise. Fifth, netnography has clear ethical guidelines, and these standards are linked to a deep concern about the abuse of data and manipulation of behavior that occur in so-called surveillance capitalism . Finally, and in conclusion to this section, I feel compelled to argue that the dominance of big data analytics methods for understanding social media phenomena come at a steep cost in terms of overshadowing a particular, and to my mind a more genuine and useful, form of understanding. I will now turn to this chapter’s central topic, which is the application of this form of research and understanding to the questions that concern e-tourism researchers.

E-Tourism and Netnography: a Natural Fit

Contemporary netnography is concerned with engaged cultural approaches to data operations that include key topics and perspectives within e-tourism, such as the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data pertaining to eWOM, online reviews, online communities, selfies, and other forms of important travel and tourism-related communication. Digital cultural consumer insight techniques such as netnography draw researcher attention to the structures, systems, and influences of cultural sociality. They study phenomena like tourism and travel as part of an embedded human experience. Examining a range of extant e-tourism research practices and topics, the final sections of this chapter seek to explain, explore, and extend the use of updated netnographic research methods for high-quality and impactful e-tourism scholarship.

Netnography seems extraordinarily relevant to e-tourism, as travel customers visit an average of at least 140 different sites or sub-sites during their search process (Whalen [2018](#)). Yet Whalen (ibid, 3424) notes that “many of Kozinets’ ([2015](#)) prescriptions are not followed in hospitality and tourism research.” Across the sample of published peer-reviewed

tourism articles, 53.9% of them were focused on destination image and tourism types of topics, a type of branding concern that has wide application across e-tourism studies. Thirty-nine-point seven percent of these publications used fan forums or online communities as their sites, and 84.1% used non-participative methods. Only 11% of the articles mentioned researcher disclosure or participant informed consent. Forty-six percent of them used thematic analysis. Sixty-seven percent of them give no specifics about the type of coding or brand of QDA software package used. This is what Whalen ([2018](#)) found – a use of netnography in tourism that predominantly is focused on destination image, uses online communities and thematic analysis, is non-participative, and does not mention ethical or data analysis practices.

However, there are at least five big advantages that netnography holds for researchers conducting e-tourism research today. The first benefit was detailed in the section above that considered how netnography is able to reveal textures and meanings of travel phenomena that elude big data analysis methods. Gretzel ([2018b](#)) points out that, although data mining may help to discover patterns, it does not provide deeper understandings about the meanings of those patterns. She sees qualitative approaches to understanding social media like netnography as continuing to play an important role in social media research in general and to tourism-related topics specially. The epistemology and axiology of netnography offer a stark contrast to those underlying the operation of big data analytics. They offer a different way to think about data. When a linguistic, meaning-based, and cultural understanding is the goal – something which can inform market communications and positioning strategies and tactics – netnography can be advantageous.

Second, netnography is both an interdisciplinary as well as an established method in the tourism and travel research field. In a non-exhaustive historical study whose data ended in 2012, Bartl et al. ([2016](#)) found that almost a quarter of the public peer-reviewed articles using netnography focused on tourism- or leisure-related topics. Xu and Wu ([2018](#), 249) found that “most” of the netnography journal publications in tourism “were published with the key tourism and hospitality journals” such as *Tourism Management*, *Annals of Tourism Research*, and the *Journal of Travel Research*. They concluded that due to these journals’ “vast readership and high citation rate”, “netnography as a new research method has been well documented and introduced to researchers in tourism and hospitality studies” (249). However, and somewhat mysteriously, Mkono and Markwell ([2014](#)) and Tavakoli and Mura ([2018](#), 190) both suggest that netnography may “not be fully legitimized” as a methodology in tourism research. Yet, with articles using and mentioning netnography published in all of the top travel and tourism peer-reviewed journals, full legitimacy is likely not very far away. Scholars from across the social sciences are applying and adapting netnography procedures to the theoretical and practical queries that fascinate their fields. Travel and tourism researchers have long been a part of this conversation.

The third advantage is clarity. To learn, to teach, and to communicate qualitative social media research methods, there is no easier approach than netnography. Netnography provides a clear instruction set and practice exercises to introduce novice e-tourism

researchers as well as to hone the skills of veteran investigators. Fourth, in the age of COVID-19, the conduct of both tourism and e-tourism research is bound to change in response to the dramatic reduction in global travel. In this situation, the ability to study online travel experiences up close may prove a huge boon to researchers. Finally, netnography fits very well with a number of the topical interests of e-tourism scholarship. I will develop these ideas, with examples, in the remainder of this chapter.

Applying Netnography to E-Tourism Research

There is a rich cultural and contextual element to many e-tourism phenomena that have already been studied using qualitative social media research techniques. Baka (2016), for instance, uses netnography to study user-generated travel reviews and their effect upon reputation management in the travel sector. Baka not only observed TripAdvisor's online travel communities and conversations, but also interviewed a very substantial number of managers, property owners, community founders, and users (around 50 people) as part of the netnography, including TripAdvisor's Cofounder and CEO. The resulting analysis is comprehensive and wide-ranging. The resulting netnography, which has been cited over 100 times in Google Scholar already, provides a useful portrait of TripAdvisor and other user-generated travel review platforms as complex phenomena embedded in a range of online and offline reputation management practices and challenges. The author notes, intriguingly, that social media and user-generated reviews have "become platforms where truth is negotiated in a public 'online court'" (160). Netnographic techniques are particularly important when the researcher is seeking to understand how online reviewers are commenting upon or attempting to capture particular cultural aspects of their travel experience. For example, Holder and Ruhanen (2017, 7) found that a "netnographic approach utilising TripAdvisor reviews has allowed for a systematic and rigorous review of post-consumption online narratives of indigenous tourism experiences in Australia" and reveals the importance of the holistic "servicescape" to traveler impressions. In their useful bibliometric analysis of netnography's use in tourism journal articles, Xu and Wu (2018) found that, although blogs, Facebook, and Twitter were used in published netnographies in tourism, "TripAdvisor, the world's largest online review community, has been most popular with the researchers" (249).

Travel experiences are fascinatingly multidimensional – they present us with a vast panoply of topics, socialities, languages, subcultures, influencers, and much more. Netnography allows us to understand some of these aspects as they are discussed and shared in various ways online. Textual communication, videos, and photography share travel experiences and reveal much that would otherwise be difficult or impossible for researchers to study. For example, Luo et al. (2015) used netnography to understand Chinese "donkey friends" travel behavior and compared them with Western backpackers, finding how their actions reflected some of the contemporary cultural forces shaping Chinese society. Wu and Pearce wanted to investigate a group that might be even more difficult to access: Chinese tourists who driven

recreational vehicles (RVs) in unfamiliar countries and compared them to mature RV users who had been studied in other contexts. The study found a variety of interesting participant characteristics, motivations, and travel patterns and also was able to identify that participants “are generally young, affluent, and well-connected to social media” (Wu and Pearce [2017](#), 710–711). The researchers found that netnography was a useful “methodology for exploring new hard to access tourism interest groups” (710) and note “the value of contextual and comparative information during the data interpretation, and the potential value of using user-generated images” (712). Providing another example, Goulding et al. ([2013](#)) studied “death tourism” at von Hagen’s “Body Worlds” exhibits. The researchers combined observational work at the exhibits with netnography of seven blogs that “contained rich and detailed information and there was also evidence of deep reflection on a number of philosophical issues relating to the body and its use as exhibit” (312). In another example, Ao ([2018](#)) conducted netnographic research about space tourism using 19,116 tweets by 36 NASA astronauts. From this analysis, the author concludes that space travel offers specific and different phases of leisure experience (training, lift-off, in-space, reentry, and memory) and suggests that these phases may lay the foundation for future marketing efforts for a space tourism industry. In each of these examples, social communication about a travel experience is shared on social media and then collected and analyzed for its theoretical and substantive insights by researchers using netnography.

The way that various sorts of travel photographs and videos are created and shared, as well as understanding their contents and the public reaction to it, is another rich area for further investigation by e-tourism researchers using netnography. Using netnography, Gretzel ([2017](#)) studied the identities communicated through the sharing of travel selfies on Instagram. The author uses the content and style of the photograph to classify travel selfies into a variety of different categories, from mundane to aesthetic/artistic, animal, sunglass, panoramic, drinks, ironic, and contemplative travel selfies. Contrasting the findings of this research with prior investigations such as Dinhopl and Gretzel ([2016](#)), the author nuances prior findings that travel selfies tend to redirect the gaze away from the destination and onto the self (Gretzel [2017](#), 124). Shakeela and Weaver ([2016](#)) studied responses to a YouTube video depicting a fake ceremony conducted at a Maldivian resort for Western guests that was intended to mock the tourists. Their netnography found two main types of responses to this inflammatory tourism-related social media video by potential tourists: “one which was hegemonic and tolerant, and the other polemical and intolerant” (122). The authors used their research as an opportunity to speculate about whether social media acts as an amplifier of conflict and about whether such exhibitions might have lasting effects upon travel destinations.

Another important phenomenon in the realm of e-tourism is the growth and power of social media travel influencers. Netnography can help researchers seeking to understand the characteristics and roles of professional and semi-professional social media micro-celebrities and how they influence both the online travel ecosystem and the global travel industry. Chatzigeorgiou ([2017](#)) pointed out the important of social media influencers to rural businesses wishing to attract global millennial travelers. This study proposed that

proper attention paid to the fame, image, and activities of social media influencers can lead to economic growth and touristic development of rural locations. In a useful introduction to and overview of the phenomenon, Gretzel ([2018a](#)) notes how travel consumers have evolved from being “occasional endorsers to micro-celebrity-seeking social media influencers,” many of whom have amassed dedicated followings as well as lucrative relationships with brand marketing and talent management agencies. Because travel marketers have long recognized the potential of online communications to amplify their messages and target particular audiences, these further developments should be of great relevance to them. Yet, “despite its prominence and practical significance, there is a lack of research that investigates the travel and tourism influencer marketing phenomenon” (Gretzel [2018a](#), 155). In the field of marketing, netnographic studies of influencers have been appearing for about a decade and have helped to inform general theory and specific practice regarding this important phenomenon.

Concluding Thoughts About Netnography and E-Tourism

E-tourism researchers often use an interesting term that appears to have originated in the field of computer science: “user-generated content” or “UGC” (Lu and Stepchenkova [2015](#)). In using the term, Lu and Stepchenkova ([2015](#), p. 142) point out the applications for the use of user-generated content deriving from social media communication toward increasing researchers’ understanding of service quality, intangibles such as the “destination image and reputation, experiences and behavior, the persuasive power of UGC as eWOM, as well as tourist mobility patterns.” UGC-based studies in the e-tourism field mention things like monitoring people and tracking them, a type of research which is clearly related to smart tourism and also has privacy-related ethical implications. E-tourism UGC researchers also like to use visualizations of digital journeys, sentiment analysis, and customer reviews. The realm of business-to-consumer communication is included in these trends and must include all forms of advertising, social media marketing, as well as public relations and crisis communications. Finally, UGC researchers like to study “tourist behavior in real time” (Lu and Stepchenkova [2015](#), 143), another objective that they have in common with many e-tourism and smart tourism scholars.

There are many ways to understand human behavior, of course, and the same is true of the vast amounts of public information shared on social media platforms such as Twitter, Pinterest, Reddit, and TripAdvisor. We can use big data analytics to discover interesting major patterns that occur across millions of entries, and we can also drill down to do detailed microscopic examinations. In netnographic work, we tend to contextualize, historicize, and dig deep for the cultural meanings and implications that connect particular phenomena to the wider world. So, for instance, in work Kozinets ([2016](#), 835) published on Amazon customer reviews, the researcher points out that “reviews and ratings offer consumers a social conversation, a communications environment that they use not only to talk about the objective and subjective characteristics of products and services, but also to socialize and communicate about themselves.” It turns out that Amazon.com’s rating and

review system is used not only “as a source of peer opinion and information to inform decisions about potential purchases,” but that “it also acts as a platform for cultural connection, witty repartee, social commentary, entertainment, personal revelation, self-promotion, revenge seeking, and many other activities” (836). I think it very likely that the social communications in e-tourism fulfil a similarly wide range of functions and that travel-related exchanges are actually very social and cultural experience in their own rights – just as has been revealed and explored by some of the excellent netnographic e-tourism research already cited in this chapter.

In some sense, a netnography that attends to the reflective reality of the researcher-as-instrument provides a type of detailed snapshot of a particular phenomenon suspended at a particular point in time, viewed from a particular linguistic and cultural lens. Over time, these netnographies aggregate into substantial sections of a field, forming a multifaceted view that collects the online chronicles of interested travel researchers. Methodologically, we might see this undertaking as the combining of a variety of smaller scale bottom-up projects. These articles, chapters, books, and other research communications offer theoretical contributions, certainly, but they are also individual assets of a type that a digital humanities scholar might appreciate, works locked into cultural times and spaces, reflexive and also archival.

In this chapter, I have attempted to provide a concise guide for e-tourism researchers interested in or perhaps considering the use of netnography. The chapter began with an explanation of netnography that examined the method’s evolution over time and charted how its definition adapted to the changing social media environment and the growing sophistication and adoption of data collection and analysis procedures. Netnography today is a flexible yet well-defined collection of different research operations. Each of these operations is adapted to the qualitative study of social media environments and data and can be adapted further to the contingencies of particular research contexts.

The chapter also examined some of the strengths and weakness of netnography in comparison to big data analytics, in particular how they might be used in e-tourism to understand social media. The chapter then detailed and described a number of different areas where e-tourism studies could benefit from more netnographic research, such as with online travel reviews and electronic word of mouth, online communities, online influencers and audiences, and travel selfies. Emphasizing the contributions of the many scholars who have already published netnographic research in the travel and tourism field, the core assertion of this chapter has been to emphasize the value of the unique modality of cultural understanding that netnography offers to contemporary tourism and hospitality, and e-tourism, researchers. Social media is so much a part of our world and so much a part of the contemporary tourism experience. In the age of COVID-19, this use of connective technology has accelerated dramatically across every sphere of human activity and, in many cases, may be replacing “traditional” travel and tourism. Because social media is interactive, experiential, and cultural, to fully understand it, it may well be that travel, tourism, and e-tourism researchers need netnography now more than ever before.

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